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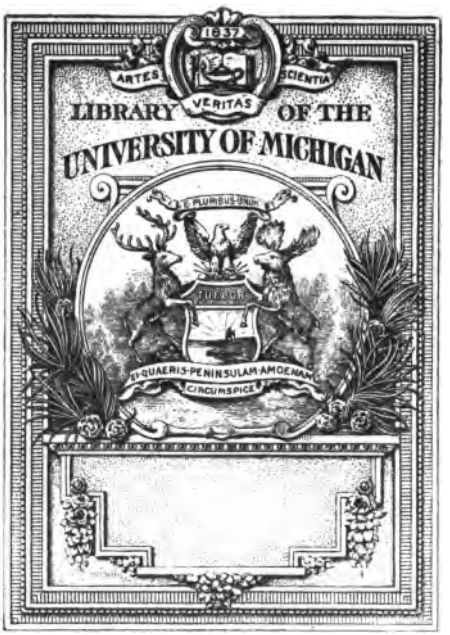
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VARIATIONS ON AN OLD THEME

Quasi una fantasia

Ananke reigns no more; her children are
But servants in the house of our God

VARIATIONS ON AN OLD THEME

JOHANNA PIRSCHER

BOSTON
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VARIATION I

VARIATION I

PSYCHE had built a snug little house, where she thought to dwell securely forever. Will had been her architect; the bricks he used were made of Content and he cemented them together with Activity. Psyche was highly pleased with the long-desired habitation and kept at home very closely.

One day when she was cheerfully at work there, she looked up and saw a gigantic form approaching. Curiosity, mingled with fear, drew her to the door.

"Art thou Death?" she whispered, awestruck, when the mysterious presence stopped by her side.

"I am Love," he answered calmly.

"Oh, well, happy journey to you!" and hastily stepping back into her house, Psyche closed the door somewhat abruptly and bolted it securely.

There was a gentle but imperious

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knock. "Such things are best ignored," she said to herself, and began to whistle as she sat down to her work again.

The knocking continued.

"Bang away! My house is firm and strong!" As if to contradict her, a harder blow at this moment made it tremble in its foundations. Psyche decided to change her policy. "Really," she cried through the door, in as calm and superior a tone as she could muster, "really, I must beg to be excused. I am exceedingly busy just now."

A series of louder strokes was the reply.

"Well then, if you insist, come in!"

"I never enter under such a roof!"

"Then don't!"

Crash — fell the little house, as though it had been built of cards.

"Come!" said the stranger.

Defiantly she closed her eyes, crossed her arms, and planted her feet firmly on the ground amid the poor ruins.

"Come!" he repeated and laid an iron

hand upon her wrist. "Who art thou to resist a force that sways the universe?"

"I am a self-determined being," Psyche cried. "I am free and shall never acknowledge anybody as my master!" With that she jerked her hand to shake off his grip, and they began to wrestle. Desperately Psyche struggled with the superior foe, but at last she lay, panting and helpless, in the dust.

Then the other stooped down to her, unshrouded his beautiful face and spoke:

"Poor, foolish child! Dost really not know whose messenger I am?"

She looked up and saw on his brow the seal of God the Almighty. Then she yielded, and he gathered her in his arms and carried her gently heavenward.

M'ToU

VARIATION II

VARIATION II

LOVE and Hope were born in the same hour, and hand in hand they journeyed on their destined course, inseparable comrades.

But when they reached the Valley of the Shadow of Death, Hope hung back, shivering; and Love, beholding pallor spreading on his sister's face, tried to encourage her with cheering words, begging her not to forsake him, and reminding her how they had overcome, united, all difficulties in their way so far. Scarcely, however, had they taken a few steps in that baneful valley, when Hope sank like a tender blossom, wilted by the sting of some malicious insect. Then Love knelt by the lifeless form, imploring her to come back to him. At last, all efforts to revive her having failed, he dug with his own hands her grave and laid her in it, turning the silent face back to the sunny land they

left behind; having thus buried Hope, he faced the terrors of the valley once again.

But soon he found his feet unsteady without Hope's buoyant step keeping time by his side, his eyes seemed dim to penetrate the gloom without the cheering light from hers; and, turning backward in despair, he sat down by her grave, covered his face and wished for death.

There was a light touch on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw a slender figure standing by his side. She was shrouded in flowing veils of gray from head to foot, and from a pale but not ignoble face two deep-set eyes gazed piercingly at him.

"Why weepest thou?" the stranger asked, as Love remained there, motionless and mute.

"I have just buried here my sister Hope. Onward I must, and yet I cannot cross this land alone!"

"Entrust thyself to me! I have the

same way, and I know it well. My home is in these regions, lonesome travelers have a claim to me!"

While speaking thus, she laid her hand on his shoulder again, and Love felt a compelling force drawing him onward. Yet with reluctance did he yield, and half unwilling.

"Art weary, friend? Thy step seems faltering! Lean harder on me still!"

"Thou art so strange, though kind! Who art thou that passest, unhurt, through these suffocating vapors?"

"They call me Melancholy; but what are names?" Her voice was ever gentle, but at times a fire lurked in her eyes that made him shiver, and her supporting arm seemed leaden weight, as they marched on. Closer and closer she drew her veils about him, more lifeless and oppressive every minute grew the air, huge mountain-walls, between which they wandered, met almost overhead. With difficulty only Love drew breath — he stumbled.

"Wouldst rest awhile? I watch you while you sleep."

Sleep? If utter darkness and powerlessness to move are sleep! No rest, but crowds of horrid images! Above him hovers, resting on hideous wings, a vampire of gigantic size, eyeing his victim. Now he descends in silent circles, which grow smaller, smaller, as he draws near — now he alights and strikes his fangs into the quivering heart.

That pain did break the spell and set Love free. Not free. His frightened eyes, on opening, behold his traveling companion crouching on his breast. How changed she is! Gentle no more, her hands hold him with iron grip, her glance wild with a tiger's thirst for blood.

Then such a cry of terror and of anguish breaks from Love's lips that it shakes the towering walls of that dismal cave and, rending them, pierces beyond.

And lo! On pinions white descends a heavenly form, shedding a soft light as

she comes. When Melancholy sees her, growling she loosens hold, and, step by step, withdraws into the darkness.

But the deliverer bends her sweet face over Love, who still lies prostrate on the ground and marvels.

" Is this my sister Hope? Hast thou come to my aid? No, thou art taller, stronger! Yet thy touch is hers! Oh, speak to me!

The other smiled, not Hope's smile, and then said: 'My name is Faith! Arise, it is not well to linger here! Arise, fear not, but follow me! There's much beyond!"

VARIATION III

VARIATION III

IT was the sunset hour of a summer day. Sweet fragrance arose from the flowerbeds of a country garden in which a young woman busied herself at the rosebushes, while keeping an eye on some curly-headed children, and directing the servants at their task of watering the plants. She expected her husband back from a little journey, and once in a while she raised her head and listened.

Now all the withered blossoms were clipped. She seated herself on a rustic bench, her thoughtful face turned toward the glories of the western sky. Expectation, sunset splendors, balmy air saturated with scent of roses and mignonette — where, when, in the long ago, had she felt the same mingling of sensations before?

Yes, that was it! Before the house of her grandparents, the home of her childhood, she stood in the narrow path, a profusion

of old-fashioned flowers all around; the sun had slowly disappeared below the horizon, leaving indescribable tints of purple, red, and gold on the sky, and in her heart a nameless longing for — what? "I really do not know, grandmother," she had said, when the dear old lady asked what the tears in her eyes meant, "I really do not know! But this all seems so beautiful it makes you feel as though you were living just in a dream, and it makes you want something, I do not know what!"

Whereupon she had hid her face on grandmother's shoulder and had sobbed a little, quite gently. And grandmother had smiled and stroked her hair, but in the evening she said to grandfather: "We must not keep the child here to ourselves, she is young and will get dreamy and lonely between us old people." And in the fall they had taken her to town to a house full of young cousins, where there was merriment, laughter, and company

every day. She had enjoyed it — at first. Then louder and louder a voice had cried within her: "But this is all so empty, so unreal!" and finally she had asked for permission to go home.

"Wait till spring, child,"— the astonished aunt had said. But when spring came, the dear old house remained closed, nobody tended the flowers in the quaint garden, and soon the property passed into the hands of strangers.

It had been a very hard blow for her! With gratitude she remembered the kindness of her aunt in this her first affliction! How they had tried to make her feel at home; how she had been encouraged to divert her grief by eager studies; how, finally, her youth had adapted itself quickly enough to her surroundings, outwardly at least.

Was she ever quiet and serious? "Just wait until you have a home of your own," the aunt would say, "husband and children take these notions out of you!"

And how everybody congratulated her, when her present husband's eager attentions foreshadowed the unquestioned bliss of such possessions! Yes, she had been very happy during those short months of his courtship; with the flush of her new importance, the excitement of preparing for her new estate, no end of pleasant surprises, blushes on her part, teasing, giggling, envious sighs from her girl friends.

And yet — had all that been, had all that led to a life of that full reality for which she was thirsting? She recalled her first misgivings, the reappearance of that great question-mark in her soul. Perhaps everybody had it? Perhaps her husband too?

"Do you ever feel that this is not all?" she had faltered out one day, when the craving for fellowship within her had become supreme. She never forgot the disturbed glance with which he, speechless, had searched her face in reply. The

next day he bought her horse and carriage and she never asked him again.

But there was a new hope coming to her. "I am going to be a mother," she had said to herself exultingly. Surely, what everybody called the crowning glory of a woman's life would fill the hungry abyss in her soul.

"And have I not been singularly blessed," she exclaimed, rising to her feet. "What a grateless, peevish wretch I am. Come, sweethearts, time to go to bed now, father may not come home to-night!" And she ran after them in a mock chase, catching them just by the garden door, and covering their glowing faces with kisses from a conscience-smitten heart.

When she rose, one child at either side and the youngest in her arms, a man had opened the gate and was advancing toward her. As she met him, he introduced himself as an old friend of her husband's, whose acquaintance he wished

to renew since chance took him into this neighborhood. There was something in his bearing and manner which made her say, almost without hesitation:

"I expected him back this evening. He may yet come, and certainly will be here to-morrow. Will you not stay and wait for him?"

She bade a servant look to his comfort and herself took the children upstairs. When she joined him later she watched him carefully while entertaining him with such light conversation as is natural between strangers, yet feeling all the time that this talk was not worthy of them; when suddenly, to a question regarding his vocation, her guest replied:

"I am a seeker after the Real, also," and a smile of such understanding and sympathy illumined for an instant his serious face that a great, warm happiness of fellowship welled up in her heart.

"Is that why I seem to have known you always," she answered, without knowing

what she said. "Do tell me a little of what you have found out by your searching so far!"

And the silent stranger became eloquent as he told of his wanderings and seeking, his disappointments and his hopes. While she listened the happy glow in her heart went on increasing, burning the petty joys and cares of her past life like chaff. The vision of a paradise dreamed of in childhood had descended to her, and for the first time she knew why she was living.

They had forgotten time and hour, until the flickering lights reminded them of it.

"It is late, and I have kept you up too long," she said, as one awakening from a dream. "You must be so tired."

"It has been a great pleasure for me," he answered in the same conventional way. His eyes said: "It was delight."

"And to-morrow?"

"To-morrow at sunrise I must be on

my way again!" There was infinite sadness in his voice. Their eyes met again. "How can you leave me?" hers questioned. "Must I go on alone?" his pleaded. They stood for a moment in silence. Then a radiant smile passed over her face:

"Until to-morrow, then," she nodded, fleeing upstairs like a doe.

But she was not ready to rest! Every pulse in her beat with this new, overflowing happiness! She paced up and down for a while, incapable of keeping still, murmuring to herself, "To-morrow, to-morrow!"

She threw herself down before her couch, sobbing "Great God! can a mortal hold such happiness!" Suddenly she stopped. Her hand had touched a pillow — her husband's pillow. This was his bed, his house! She drew herself up. Quiet, as she suddenly was, she could hear a soft muttering from the adjoining room. Those were her children! She

rose very slowly. For a minute the realization of the situation kept her as spellbound,— then a wave of humiliation broke over her.

"Good God! What sort of a woman am I, betraying the holiest ties to a stranger, and in the very house given into my keeping!"

"Holiest ties? Stranger?" a sneering echo seemed to repeat. "He is no stranger to your soul, and which are *holiest* ties?"

She brooded awhile, then energetically lit a taper and walked into the next room. The sight of her children would surely strengthen her conscience.

How often she had gone thus to the little beds, listening to the soft, regular breathing of the babies, gently brushing back a stray curl from the rosy cheeks of one, covering up bared little legs, and feeling deepest, peaceful joy of motherhood surging in her heart! But now, just when she sought it, that tenderness

did not come to her. Instead of it, incredible to herself,— a coldness, almost an aversion, against this offspring of a union which all at once seemed unhallowed, unnatural! How they resembled their father! Could she ever caress them again? How would they get along without her? Children forget so quickly! They would be well cared for! If she should die, things would have to be managed, and this was a call as irresistible as death!

As irresistible? Wrath seized her against any teachings of her youth that asserted their quiet presence by that question. If she just were a woman capable of simply following her inclinations, instead of being handicapped, trammeled, in this one overwhelming experience of her life! She chafed at her fate, running up and down in the room until physical fatigue forced her to sit down. Hot tears of anger mellowed to tears of self-pity — laying her head upon her

arms on the window-sill she closed her eyes.

When they opened again she could not tell whether she had been asleep or not. But the stars had grown dim overhead, white masses of mist were floating over the meadows, indistinct contours of trees and houses began to outline themselves.

Dawn! This was the morning she had scarcely been able to expect last night! What would it bring to her? "At sunrise," he had said.

In the awe of daybreak the conflict within her did not seem laid, but elevated and ennobled.

Would she go, in a little while, softly creeping down the stairs, to say to him, "I am ready?" Iron chains seemed to draw her to the door.

Was he struggling, as she was, at this moment? If he did take her with him — was he a man to be trusted? If she went — would she not be a burden, possibly a shame to him? There was the door —

more and more light without. She felt helpless, buoyed up and down in a torrent of feelings that benumbed her will.

Hark! Was not that a hushed footstep! With every nerve strained to listen, an indescribable horror seized her. Would he call — would he wait?

An uncertain hand moved the bolt of the house door just below her window. A little creak, as it opened and closed again!

He must be outside now! Was he forsaking her? Did he despise her? Pride brought back her self-possession. She moved a little away from the window.

A tall form approached the garden gate, passed through it, turned back his head. Two burning, sunken eyes in an ashen, haggard face ran passionately over the row of the upper windows — then the form bounded away and, still running, was soon lost in the distance.

The whole nobleness of this flight flashed upon her — first with a flush of

exultation, leaving, the next instant, a sense of bereavement keener than she could bear.

She threw herself down again before her bed, and, in an agonized and broken prayer, met the Reality she had always sought.

VARIATION IV

VARIATION IV

DO you know the Never, Never Land? I hope you never have been there, nor ever will be!

In the Never, Never Land the sun has lost its brightness, and moon and stars are gone. Instead, there flash from the dark heavens an Aurora Borealis of horror, in flaming letters the words: Never! Never! In their dread light you can distinguish just enough to see that you are walking on dead ashes. Crushed beneath your tread, they crunch and groan out: Never! Never! Black, lusterless, a shriveled vegetation here and there forms clumps of darker shadow. On every leaf and blade red glowing veins form the inscription: Never! Never! To quench your thirst you follow gurgling sounds of water; but when you reach the dark pool whence they come and bend

down to moisten your parched lips, it bubbles up and sizzles: Never! Never!

Yet you find yourself in good company amid these horrors, for none that is thoughtless or shallow or unfeeling can find the way to the Never, Never Land, and there are many distinguished and brilliant people among its sad inhabitants. Some of them, by reason of strength, have overcome the leaden apathy which falls upon those who dwell there long; they exercise their faculties, as best they can, for their own entertainment and for the benefit of others. The most talented among them have systematized all sights and sounds into Never, Never Symphonies,— Literature and Philosophies. Those of a practical turn of mind endeavor to bring light into the mournful land by fireworks of their own making — but alas, the sparks from all their gorgeous firewheels and sky-rockets trace nothing but a rain of fiery: Never, Nevers! in the gloomy dark! Still

others go about doing good to their fellow-sufferers: they press their hands with sympathetic sighs and bind up bleeding feet. But the Never, Never in their eyes is the most heart-wringing part of it all.

Finally exhaustion falls upon you from stumbling about in the dusky wilderness. You feel no more the smarting of your bruised feet nor the thirst that consumes your very soul in you, for the dazzling of the fiery letters everywhere, the moaning of the same dismal sound have stunned all other sensations.

There is a dark, dark passage in a mountain, which in their search for escape those find whom God loveth. When they have groped their way through it for a long time, they finally perceive light from the other side, and it is not the flaming scarlet of the Never! Never! any more. It is softer than the moonlight, yet brighter

than the sun, and the soul passing out into it feels like those who dream.

For where are the horrors of yesterday? Bathed in the wonderful light extend before you all the marvels of creation. All that ever has been is here present, yet not crowded nor at war. Neither does anything appear ugly or unhappy in this transfiguration. One veil of mist after the other is lifted and discloses to the amazed eye beauties untold and undreamed of, all bearing the radiant stamp: Ever! Ever! The ocean of Eternity bounds this land, and as its silver ripples softly lap against the shore of Time, they murmur Ever, Ever.

Here wander with you, light-stepped, to the music of the spheres, blessed souls, — some near, some like a luminous vision in the distance, and the Ever! Ever! which like a halo flows out of their very being, is the crowning glory of it all. Eagerly, yet without impatience, they press on towards perfect union in a

common goal, delighted with the way they tread, delighted more with the hope before them.

Farther and farther you see, and, seeing, understand, and, understanding, love. All is yours, all is eternal, and all is moving forward. Now you know that you have come to the Ever, Ever Land, and you also know that you came by the only road to it. And did I say: I hope you never were in the Never, Never Land, nor ever will be? I would not say that any more.